

## Review: Path dependency and communal tolerance in Indonesia

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**Book Review:**

## **Path Dependency and Communal Tolerance in Indonesia**

**Gde Dwitya Arief Metera\***

The study of the intersection between religion and politics, especially the literature scrutinizing the link between religious culture and political regime, has seen a new promising research avenue. Once dominated by the assumption of incompatibility between Islam and democracy due to an allegedly inherent modality of Islam (see, for example, Huntington 1996), the literature has recently moved toward a more nuanced understanding of Islam substantiated by historically grounded research that looks at Islam beyond the confine of the MENA region. Against a strict assumption of secularism in the study of the state-religion relations, Alfred Stepan (2000) suggests the existence of a twin toleration model in which both the state and religious groups respect each other's boundaries for democracy to work. Jeremy Menchik's remarkable study on the tolerance of Islamic groups in Indonesia, notably the world largest Muslim democracy, is a prime example of the fertility of the new ground of research that Stepan has charted. Menchik's *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* thus unmistakably stands among other great books studying Islam and democracy outside the MENA in general and Southeast Asia in particular (see e. g. Hefner 2000).

The book enriches our understanding of religious tolerance in the Muslim world by conceptualizing what Menchik terms as 'communal tolerance' (pp.146-158) found in the attitudes of several of Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations. Communal tolerance is distinct from the Lockean and Rawlsian secular-liberal model of tolerance commonly found in the Western hemisphere. While the Lockean and Rawlsian understanding of tolerance emphasizes individual rights, communal tolerance instead emphasizes rights at the level of religious community.

The book also traces back the origin of this communal tolerance to the early years of the establishment of three of Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations. By tracing their history, the book argues that the distinctive notion of tolerance in several of Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations is caused by the ideas of friends and enemies emerging from the configuration of conflicts that those groups engaged in at the local level. The ideas of friends and enemies are transmitted to the present through Islamic edicts as well as political alliances. Thus, communal tolerance largely follows a path dependent kind of development, explaining the contemporary attitude of tolerance in those mass Islamic organizations.

The book specifically aims at two goals. The first is to answer a set of two distinct research questions, namely (i) how do Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations understand the concept of tolerance? And (ii), since the degree of tolerance of each organization is varied, what explains this variation in their degree of tolerance (p.19)? The second goal of the book is to develop a novel approach to answer those two research questions with what Menchik dubs the 'historical constructivist' approach (p.4).

The architecture of the book puts the second research question in the foreground. The second chapter of the book outlines the research design and the overall strategy to arrive at a causal inference, explaining the variation of the level of tolerance found among Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations (p.24-35). The first thing on Menchik's task list is to measure the degree of tolerance among three representative mass Islamic organizations in Indonesia: *Persis*, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (or commonly referred to as *NU*) and *Muhammadiyah*, which are taken as his dependent variable. Specifically, Menchik develops several behavioural indicators and discursive indicators as yardsticks. Full intolerance, for example, is characterized by persecution by actors as a behavioural indicator and stigmatization by actors as a discursive indicator. Full tolerance, on the other hand, is characterized by supports and calling for protection by actors as a behavioural and discursive

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indicator respectively. By developing these organizational indicators of tolerance, Menchik ably categorizes *Persis* as the least tolerant, *Muhammadiyah* tolerant to an intermediate extent, and *NU* as the most tolerant.

The third chapter of the book details the historical narrative regarding the configuration of local conflicts in which each mass Islamic organization is embedded during its formative years. This is also quite an impressive chapter derived from an original analysis largely based on primary sources. Inspired by the idea of path dependency in the classic work of Lipsett & Rokkan (1967) and Pierson's theoretical elaboration (2004), Menchik takes the cue that organizational attitude can be explained by tracing back the organization's history to its moment of origin and by looking at the kind of cleavages and polarization that help shape the organization. These cleavages of conflicts, furthermore, are also influenced by another causal factor that Menchik observed – the ethnic composition of the mass Islamic organizations. The combination of ethnic composition and the kind of cleavages developed at the local level explains the degree of tolerance of each organization.

*Muhammadiyah* is a case of a reformist Islamic organization with an intermediate degree of tolerance that is first explained in this chapter. It was engaged in a polemic over the merit of Islam with Christian missionary leaders during the early 1920s as well as with the colonial state that is privileging the Christian community. During the similar period, *Muhammadiyah* also began to distinguish itself from the traditionalist Muslim groups through its reformist Islamic *fatwas* or edicts. The tone of *Muhammadiyah's* *fatwas* in response to the growing conflicts with both the Christian community and the traditionalist Muslims, however, were not hostile and were not even pejorative. In contrast to *Muhammadiyah*, *Persis* as the least tolerant organization developed an intense conflict against the Communists and Christian missionaries during its early days. This conflict with the Christians was exacerbated by the congruence of Islam with the Sundanese ethnic identity of West Javanese as the main base of *Persis* followers. Finally, *Nahdlatul Ulama* as the most tolerant organization has been relatively free from intense conflict with either the Communists or the Christians in its early years of formation. Christian missionaries arrived late in East Java and the Christianity they espoused largely took a syncretic form that infused Javanese elements into their ritual practice. The kind of cleavage that *NU* developed was instead with the reformist Muslim organization *Muhammadiyah* and not with the Christians.

After extracting causal factors from the history of the three mass Islamic organizations, Menchik runs a logistic regression to check whether those causal factors correlate well with the degree of tolerance toward Christians. The two causal factors that have been identified through the previous historical analysis, namely ethnic composition and membership of each Islamic organization, indeed show a significant correlation with tolerance (p.63).

Chapter 4 and 5 introduce a new causal factor, which is the state. The constant intolerance of the three Islamic organizations toward the Ahmadis is explained by the state's attitude in chapter 4. Menchik argues that the state persecution of a certain minority will stimulate intolerance by mass Islamic organizations in civil society. More specifically, the state intolerance toward heterodox groups like the Ahmadis actually serves a purpose of fostering a sense of exclusive national identity that Menchik refers to as 'godly nationalism'. Similarly, as Menchik elaborates in chapter 5, the tolerance of the three mass Islamic organizations toward the Balinese Hindus stems from the fact that the state supported the transformation of Balinese Hinduism in the 1950s to meet the requirements of a state religion, which includes abandoning polytheism.

Chapter 5 also shows how the interaction with the state explains the shifting attitudes of the mass Islamic organizations over time. The two notable shifts that Menchik explains are *Persis's* tolerance toward Christians in the 1950s and *NU's* intolerance toward the Communists (represented by the Indonesian Communist Party, PKI) in the 1960s. *NU's* intolerance toward the Communists in the mid-1960s, Menchik argues, was due to *NU's* growing alliance with the Indonesian military in the context of a nascent threat of land reform espoused by the Communists in the countryside. *Persis's* temporary tolerance toward Christians, on the other hand, was largely a counterbalance to the rise of the communist-nationalist alliance in the context of Indonesia's changing political landscape in the 1950s.

Finally, chapter 6 answers the book's first research question. Through what he terms the 'comparative political theory' approach, Menchik contrasts the kind of tolerance that he finds in Indonesia with several conceptualizations of tolerance from various philosophical traditions. Menchik especially finds that the Lockean and Rawlsian tradition emphasizing individual rights does not fit the tolerance that he finds in Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations. The tolerance

that *NU* and *Muhammadiyah* exhibit instead focuses on the communal level. These mass Islamic organizations put up with some religious communities and not others. According to Menchik, there are four ways in which 'communal tolerance' differs from the Lockean and Rawlsian secular-liberal model: (i) an emphasis on communal rather than individual rights, (ii) support for communal self-governance through legal pluralism, (iii) a separation between social and religious affairs, and (iv) the primacy of faith over other values (p. 146).

In its own right, each chapter in the book is an impressive study illuminating each causal factor shaping the contour of tolerance found in Indonesia's mass Islamic organizations. Chapter 3, 4, and 5 are especially rich, textured, and as a whole exhibit a sharp historical analysis derived from both primary and secondary resources that will impress historians and comparative historical scholars in political science alike. Likewise, chapter 6 demonstrates an exemplary and thoughtful engagement with the study of tolerance in political theory.

The only thing that is found wanting in the book, if any, is an overarching, systematic notion of causality underlying the overall analysis. The book's causal argument arguably is not anchored in the tradition of quantitative, statistical analysis (see King, Keohane, Verba 1994). The conscious case selection of the dependent variable suggests an affinity with the tradition of qualitative, comparative historical analysis. Also, the logistic regression serves to demonstrate correlation, but does not imply causation convincingly. Interestingly, the argument is not firmly anchored in the qualitative, comparative historical analysis tradition either. Despite the prevalent usage of concepts in the comparative historical parlance, such as path dependency, the book curiously stops short of actually employing its underlying causal notion, as is commonly found in the strategies of identifying necessary or sufficient conditions utilized by comparative historians (see Mahoney 2000; 2009, Mahoney & Goertz 2006). The need to clearly elaborate the underlying notion of causality is crucial since the book aims at establishing causal inference and does not only deal with a critical interpretive exercise. More importantly, as the book's second goal is to develop a novel historical-constructivist approach, a clear notion of causality would help the approach find its place in the field of comparative politics.

In addition, it is also evident that the tolerance of the mass Islamic organizations was shifting back and forth over time. This fact sits at odds with the idea of a 'freezing cleavage' in Lipset and Rokkan's original study, as well as the idea of institutional stability due to the 'increasing returns' mechanism in Pierson's theoretical elaboration of path dependency, from which the book draws inspiration. The role of the state also does not fit well with the path-dependence mode of explanation since the presence of the state in the configuration of local conflicts in which the three mass Islamic organizations were embedded was rather minimal. As a consequence, the causal role of the state in the book is explained separately, if not awkwardly, utilizing a new assumption of 'coevolution of the state and religion' (pp.93-94) instead of weaved together in the previous analysis that utilizes the path-dependency approach.

This minor quibble aside, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* is undoubtedly a significant contribution to the literature of religion and politics in general as well as Islam and democracy in particular. It is now incumbent upon future students of Islam and democracy to engage Menchik's argument and to meet the high standard he has set with his rigorous study.

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